

In Hollywood, Black Is In: Black film makers are being welcomed as ...

By JAMES GREENBERG

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A. J. Johnson and Christopher Reid in Reginald Hudlin's "House Party," a comedy about teen-agers that opens on Friday

In Hollywood, Black Is In

By JAMES GREENBERG

LOS ANGELES

WHEN MELVIN VAN PEEBLES FIRST CAME TO Hollywood 34 years ago to break into movies, he was offered work as an elevator operator. Last month he was honored at the Sundance United States Film Festival as a pioneering black film maker. When Wendell Harris Jr. first came to Hollywood with hopes of working as an actor in 1976, he couldn't get past "the secretary to the secretary" to see an agent. Earlier this year, his first feature, "Chameleon Street," won the grand jury prize at the Sundance Festival.

Would the same thing happen in 1990 to a black film maker who came knocking on Hollywood's door? Not likely, for a number of reasons, most of them economic. Black film makers are being welcomed into the film industry as never before. Just about every studio in town has a project in development with a black director ... or wants to.

Hollywood has long recognized the potency of the black film-going audience, and legend has it that it was that audience that rescued the industry from a bleak period in the early 70's with the success of a series of black exploitation pictures. The crucial difference now is that

Black film makers are being welcomed as never before by studios that recognize their moneymaking potential.

industry marketing mavens long resistant to the idea are beginning to recognize that a white audience will spend money to see black movies. It's not a realization that happened overnight, and the unprecedented success of Eddie Murphy and more recently the trend-setting popularity of Arsenio Hall have certainly been factors. But more directly responsible was Spike Lee's left field hit "She's Gotta Have It" in 1986, which opened the eyes of the industry to the potential of black films. Following "She's Gotta Have It," Robert Townsend humorously exposed the stereotyping of blacks in the film industry in his satire "Hollywood Shuffle." Keenen Ivory Wayans, who co-wrote "Hollywood Shuffle" and made his own contribution with "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka," a parody of B action movies, can't deny or exaggerate

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In Hollywood Now, Black Is Beautiful

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the changes or how they came about. "She's Gotta Have It" and "Hollywood Shuffle" were made under extreme terms," says Mr. Wayans. "They were films that were never meant to get made. Movies are not supposed to be made on credit cards and Government grants, and loans from your grandmother," says the soft-spoken Mr. Wayans, sitting in his production company office beside a poster for "Cooler High," a favorite film from his youth.

But they did, and a movement of diverse film makers with varied goals was under way as barriers started falling. Each new film established a precedent and broadened the range of acceptable styles and subject matter. Mr. Lee upped the ante with his insistence on making serious and provocative entertainment, and with the success last summer of "Do the Right Thing," he challenged the status quo of what a black film could say and get away with. "Hollywood

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doesn't care what kind of films they are," says Mr. Lee, "as long as they make money."

Enter the Hudlin Brothers

Reginald and Warrington Hudlin grew up in East St. Louis, Ill., a place they call "the blackest city in America." Since graduating from Yale in 1974, Warrington has been plying his dues as an independent film maker. Last year, Reggie was approached by New Line Cinema. He sent them two scripts, and they decided to produce "House Party," based on a 20-minute short Reginald had made as his senior thesis at Harvard. Screened before a white audience for the first time at Sundance, "House Party," an all-American story of teen-age turmoil told through the black idiom of rap music and hip-hop culture, won the film makers' trophy as well as an award for cinematography.

The enthusiastic reception for "House Party" in Sundance demonstrated that a film can have crossover appeal without sacrificing its cultural authenticity. After the festival, the Hudlins went to Los Angeles,

where, for two weeks, they were the target of intense courting by the Hollywood establishment, which smelled a hit. "House Party" opens nationally on Friday.

"This is the best time in history to be a black film maker," says Reginald Hudlin, relishing the possibility of an audience that wasn't being served before. The studio said, "Him, black film makers. That's a good idea."

Thomas Pollock, chairman of M.C.A.'s motion picture group, the company that produced "Do the Right Thing," says he doesn't think that way. "It was a business decision. We believed in Spike as a film maker. It wasn't about black. We believed in the subject matter directed by him. I don't want to take credit for breaking ground for black film makers. It may be true, but all that really proves is Spike is a great film maker."

Executives Say They're Color-Blind

Indeed, most of the executives in

interviewed for this story insisted that Hollywood was color-blind. But since it is so overwhelmingly a white community, the films Hollywood turns out are inevitably products of a white imagination. The black population makes up 11 percent of the moviegoing public, but 30 percent are frequent moviegoers (as opposed to 24 percent of the white population). Still, only a handful of the more than 400 films produced by Hollywood last year were made by black film makers or dealt with black themes.

Barry Reardon, president of distribution for Warner Brothers, admits that it is slightly more difficult to market a film with a black theme, but he is quick to note that with the success of such films as "The Color Purple," "There are no minuses [in making black films]. Any time a genre becomes popular and makes money, it becomes accepted in the marketplace."

Furthermore, in a high visibility area like the entertainment industry, producing black films has an intangible public relations value and makes the studios look as if they are doing the right thing. "Having a successful black film gives a studio a great social profile," says Mr. Wayans. "It makes the executives smell like roses."

Nonetheless, it took four years, with the help of his mother, for Wendell Harris Jr., a Juilliard graduate, to raise the money from independent investors to make "Chameleon Street," the true story of a black man (played by Mr. Harris) who assumes a variety of professional disguises. Now he is "reeling" from the offers pouring in. Aside from several of the major studios and independent companies interested in distributing his film, he has been approached by no fewer than 10 companies about other scripts he might have on the shelf. Representatives from the most powerful agencies in town, including Creative Artists and William Morris, have contacted him about signing with the company. Warner Brothers is even interested in purchasing the remake rights to "Chameleon Street" as a vehicle for Arsenio Hall.

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Reginald Hudlin with his brother, the producer Warrington Hudlin, who made "House Party," a prize winner at the Sundance Festival

"I wasn't born yesterday, and I'm not totally unprepared for the related actor's voice, measuring his excitement. But I thought it would come after the film was released, not before."

How Deep Is the Interest?

Because Hollywood is moved by historical precedent, no one particularly wants to be first. Everyone wants to be second. Consequently there is a competitive spirit driving the industry's new-found interest in black film makers. Stephen D. Barnes, an attorney for Bloom, DeLeon and Hergott, one of Hollywood's leading entertainment law firms, acknowledges the openings but wonders how deep the motives are. "There has not been a consistent effort on the part of any major film company to develop black film makers," argues Mr. Barnes. "When someone gets hot, like a Spike Lee or a Keenen Wayans or a Reggie Hudlin, every studio will talk to them, every studio will do a deal with them. Whether they will commit to make the movie is another matter. And that takes a tremendous amount of heat. I don't get the sense that there is a consistent interest, aside from a Spike Lee movie or a Reggie Hudlin movie, something that has commercial value."

"I do see a tremendous number of talented people who are about to get their opportunities, and when they do, the quality of the films and commercial success will convince the studios that this is a gold mine they've tapped into."

The studios may not yet be ready to put \$20 million in the hands of a black film maker, but there are numerous small-scale projects in the works. Charles Lane, who wrote, directed, starred in and raised the money for the silent comedy "Sidewalk Stories," has landed two deals since the release of his picture. At Touchstone he will direct the English comic Lenny Henry in "True Identity," and for Island Pictures he will direct his own script for "Skins," an interracial romantic comedy.

The television director ("Raisin in the Sun") and actor Bill Duke will break into feature film making with "Rage in Harlem," an action picture starring Forest Whitaker, followed by a biography of Ossie Redding for A & M Pictures, a project that has kicked around for years and, given the current climate of Hollywood, may finally be made. The director Euzhan Palcy ("A Dry White Season") is in the early stages of developing another music-related feature, a biography of the blues biter Bessie Smith.

Another director, Rolando Hudson, moves from music videos to movies with "Go Beverly," a black coming-of-age love story at Island Pictures written by his wife, Pam Gibson, and Nelson George. Mr. George, a longtime black-music writer for Billboard, is also writing a screenplay about the Apollo Theater for Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment.

Not every black project is being instantly pooked up. After his project made the rounds of the studios and went into turnaround at Warner Brothers, Robert Townsend landed at 20th Century Fox with "The Five Heartbeats," a script he co-wrote with Mr. Wayans.

Perhaps the most exciting new project — one that challenges the expanding boundaries for black entertainment — is not a motion picture at all but a television show, "In Living Color." Scheduled to make its debut



Wendell Harris Jr., who wrote and directed "Chameleon Street," was a prize winner



Keenen Ivory Wayans, who wrote and directed "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka"

on the Fox network in late spring, this show is an audacious black-themed "Saturday Night Live," created by and featuring Mr. Wayans and a cast of mostly black comic actors. The humor is blunt and topical and aimed directly at the color line with such bits as a gay black parody of Siskel and Ebert and a child's-eye view of the white world. "White people don't have a problem with black entertainment; it's only when they're told by marketing that it's not for them that they don't get into it," says Mr. Wayans.

What "In Living Color" and other films by black film makers offer an audience is a fresh way of seeing the world, says the show's producer, Tamara Rawitt. "Hollywood is finally awakening to the idea that you can tell a familiar story from a new perspective and attract a large audience. 'In Living Color' we take an existing genre and tickle it with a scalpel," says Ms. Rawitt. "It's for a hip and progressive audience with the same street energy Arsenio Hall has."

Whether Hollywood knows it or not, "when you talk about language, style, music or dance, the people who carry culture in America from Day One have been black," theorizes Warrington Hudlin. Somehow movies have been left behind. "Motion pictures are the last frontier, and we're here to tame the West," says Reginald Hudlin, burning with the energy of his first success. "Hollywood is now convinced that there is something special about a black perspective, but the financial value of that has been undervalued. Eddie Murphy is still regarded as an exception to the rule," says Mr. Hudlin incredulously.

Mr. Wayans believes that what

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holds down the potential of black films more than anything is marketing. His frustration is obvious when he rehearses misuses in the selling of "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka." "They say, 'No one will go see this.' Why? Because they wouldn't? It's a racist attitude. You can't sell a film as a black picture. You sell it as a comedy or whatever it is. You never see a film publicized as 'the whitest movie you've ever seen — all white people,'" he says, launching into a mock pitch.

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The solution? "A film will have to come along and hit a home run, a grand slam, and make \$60 million or \$70 million and blow preconceptions out of the water," he says. "Then Hollywood will take a whole other approach."

And maybe then black film makers will get a chance to work on bigger-budget projects. What makes black films appealing now to both the major studios and the independents is that they can be made for a price, with little risk. "Do the Right Thing" was a good deal at \$6 million; at \$12 million, Universal wouldn't have made it. But for \$2 million, you can't do an epic or anything really meaningful, says Mr. Wayans. "Being in this position is a lot of responsibility, because people are looking for you to do everything at once. But to be a diverse film maker you need to command the budgets to make the kinds of films you want to make, and that will only happen when you make your mark in the mainstream and become part of everyone's audience."

Spike Lee Speaks Out

Sidney Ganis, president of Paramount Motion Pictures, the company that bankrolls Eddie Murphy, insists that the only criterion that he uses in selecting a director is: Who is the best person for the job? Since that is open to a world of interpretation, it's an attitude that doesn't necessarily

'This is the best time in history to be a black film maker,' says the director Reginald Hudlin.

make Spike Lee happy. One of the projects currently in development by Mr. Murphy's company and Paramount is the film version of August Wilson's play "Fences," a dramatic tour de force about black family life in the 1950's. Mr. Wilson reportedly submitted to Paramount a list of suggested black directors that included Mr. Lee, Gordon Parks, Bill Duke and Lloyd Richards. Also under consideration by Paramount is Barry Levinson, a white director of such films as "Rain Man" and "Tin Men." Mr. Lee says he is "gravely disturbed" at that possibility and labels it "wrong with a capital 'W.'" Mr. Wilson was not available for comment.

Spike Lee is a hard man to please, and, though he admits things are better than ever before, he is appalled by the dearth of black executives in the industry. On a recent visit to Creative Artists Agency, he says, he was disturbed to see only one black agent and a black receptionist. "Mike Ovitz [the chairman of C.A.A.] is one of the most powerful men in Hollywood. If he were committed to aggressively going out and hiring black people and setting up a training program, there'd be more black agents," says Mr. Lee, working up a head of steam. "If they were interested in change, it would have happened a long time ago. And it's not just C.A.A.; it's all over. It changes when people with clout demand it, and when I have more clout, I plan to talk to Universal about it."

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In his short time dealing with the studios, Mr. Harris has observed "a weird dance... always elliptical and oblique. The studios are huge monsters with frail, tremulous souls. No one individual can make a decision. It's like a 12-headed beast."

What's needed, according to Mr. Wayans, is greater self-reliance and financial independence from Hollywood. "The destiny of black arts rests on black people and black corporate America. Every year it's another conference and more talk, but there's no evidence of anything happening right now. As long as Hollywood controls the mainstream, we need a sponsor within the industry. We have no voice without black executives in the business, and right now there is no black executive who can green-light a project."

The Hudlin brothers don't intend to sit back passively and be the recipients of change. "We want to effect change," says Warrington Hudlin. "Film is a business founded on alliances and worthwhile investments. Hollywood is just one source to secure capital. We're not going to depend on people's good will; we will depend on people's good business sense."

It is impossible for black film makers like the Hudlins, Mr. Lee and Mr. Wayans not to be aware of their precarious position in Hollywood. "Black film makers may be not today, but tomorrow it will be Hispanic films. What happens then?" asks Mr. Lee. □